

Diplomats Discuss Future of OSCE at Conference

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OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier opening the Security Days event. **Jonathan Perfect**

VIENNA — Diplomats at a conference organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe all agreed Tuesday that international organizations were vital in helping to overcome the Cold War spirit that still besets relations across the East-West divide, but they were unable to provide any clear answers to the issues on the agenda.

The G8 summit running in parallel with the OSCE's Security Days conference seemed to cast doubt on the success of such organizations in smoothing over relations and resolving conflict, as Russia on Tuesday reportedly clashed with other G8 leaders on the Syria conflict after earlier blocking several UN resolutions on the same issue.

Andrei Kelin, Russia's permanent representative to the OSCE, said it was precisely this sort of friction between nations that the OSCE should be used to confront.

"We cannot break through that barrier to reestablish trust among nations. There is not going to be a war, but it is unclear where we will go next, whether it will be a truly common space or something else. These are the questions that can be discussed within the framework of the OSCE," he said.

'Having Russia and the U.S. outside the UN makes a difference. There needs to be such a conversation.'

David Galbreath

Alexander Grushko, Russia's envoy to NATO, echoed similar sentiments. "There is a competitive market of security organizations across the Atlantic, but the OSCE can serve as a hub where all of these organizations meet," he said.

Hundreds of diplomats gathered in the Hofburg Palace on Monday and Tuesday, the former seat of Austrian Emperors who ruled over one of the most diverse empires in history, to discuss general security challenges and politico-military activities within the OSCE region.

Despite the official agenda, however, Syria took center stage behind the scenes. A member of the official Russian delegation said there were still no clear solutions to the crisis, despite the political efforts of Russia and the U.S. to convene a peace conference in Geneva, and that it might take years for a resolution of the conflict.

Russia has found itself butting heads with Western states over Syria during the ongoing G8 summit in Northern Ireland, with Vladimir Putin resisting the push of his seven colleagues to specify the fate of President Bashar Assad in the final declaration, expected to be released late Tuesday.

In the joint attempt of Russia and the U.S. to convene a conference on the crisis, the two have not been able to come to a mutually acceptable decision on who should represent the two warring sides in the conflict.

The OSCE was established in 1973 as the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, when both the Soviet Union and the West agreed for the first time that the treatment of citizens within national borders is a matter of legitimate international concern.

The organization was instrumental in building up trust and formalizing communication between NATO and Warsaw pact countries, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the OSCE has been looking for a new role to give it a sense of purpose.

Unlike many similar entities, the OSCE, the largest security-oriented intergovernmental organization in the world, adopts its decisions only on a consensus basis, with both big and small states having an equal vote in its proceedings.

This has often led to more powerful states, like Russia and the United States, acting independently instead of following the long and tedious procedure for building up

a consensus. It is for this reason that the OSCE was powerless to prevent the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and numerous conflicts in Central Asia.

Nevertheless, many participants at the conference said the organization was still crucial.

David Galbreath, professor of international security at the University of Bath, said "having Russia and the U.S. outside the UN makes a difference. There needs to be such a conversation outside the UN Security Council framework."

Russia has had a rocky relationship with the OSCE, especially in the field of election monitoring, with the latter often accusing the former of having "double standards."

"They [unnamed Western states] are trying to transform the OSCE into a vulgar instrument designed to promote the foreign policy interests of one or a group of countries. And this task is also being accomplished by the OSCE's bureaucratic apparatus, which is absolutely not connected with the state founders in any way," Vladimir Putin said in his famous 2007 Munich security conference speech.

Following the 2012 Russian presidential election, the OSCE said the campaign conditions were "clearly skewed in favor of one of the contestants, current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin."

Despite this, Grushko said, the OSCE is still important, albeit more in terms of its politico-military dimension: "We respect the OSCE's work in democratization, but we believe that it would be more instrumental in bringing progress in terms of arms control," he said.

The main unresolved issue, though, was what awaits the OSCE in the future. According to Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the Russia in Global Affairs magazine, "The problem is that the organization has lost its purpose."

The conference's participants tried but were unable to provide a clear answer to this issue.

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